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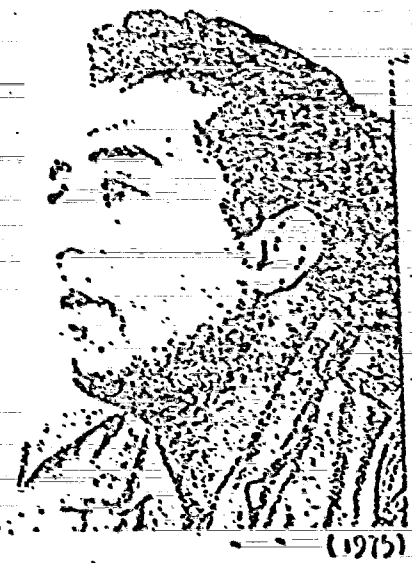
YEMEN ARAB REPUBLIC — Ibrahim Muhammad al-HAMDI

Chairman, Command Council; Commander in Chief, Yemen Armed Forces



(1975)

Ibrahim al-Hamdi (pronounced HAHMdee), Chairman of the ruling Command Council, seized power in a bloodless coup on 13 June 1974. A career military officer, he is also Commander in Chief of the Yemen Armed Forces. Prior to his coup, he had served since December 1972 as Deputy Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. A senior US official has described Hamdi as a "cool, cautious middle-of-the-roader who is willing to cooperate with anyone willing to cooperate with him on his own terms." Hamdi pictures himself as a progressive nationalist trying to bring his country into the 20th century and to abolish its primitive tribal nature.

Hamdi claims that his takeover "was forced on the army" by the disintegration of central authority in San'a. In the 2 years preceding his coup, which he prefers to call a "corrective movement," he made little secret of his impatience with what he saw as the acceptance by Yemen's civilian leadership of a high level of corruption and its vacillation and indecision toward the security threat posed by the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and Iraq-supported subversives. In the fall of 1972, after a brief border war with the PDRY, he seriously considered a military takeover, but he was dissuaded by civilian friends within the government.

## Consolidation of Power

Since assuming power, Hamdi has moved cautiously but decisively to consolidate his position and to tackle the multitude of problems facing a Yemeni leader. He has also attempted, largely successfully, to reduce the power and influence of both conservative political rightists, such as 'Abdallah al-Ahmar and Mujahid Abu Shawarib, and opportunistic leftists, such as Muhsin al-'Ayni, Sinan Abu Luhum and Yahya al-Mutawakkil. In November 1975 Hamdi dissolved the Consultative Assembly, the last bastion of tribal and conservative power.



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Because he relies on the military for his political support, Hamdi has ousted from important commands those army officers who support his political opponents and replaced them with men of his own age and political persuasion. In accordance with the traditional Yemeni form of political exile, he has appointed several of these opponents to diplomatic posts abroad.

## Political Complications of Military Modernization

One of the most pressing problems facing Hamdi is modernization of the Yemen Armed Forces—a major issue since the 1972 border clashes with the PDRY. Hamdi feels that he needs modern military equipment for two reasons: to protect his country from the militantly Marxist regime in Aden, which is armed with modern Soviet equipment, and to strengthen the central government's power vis-a-vis Yemen's tribal shaykhs.

The Saudis, always an important factor in Yemeni politics, have traditionally backed the tribal shaykhs at the expense of the central government. Since coming to power, Hamdi has tried to convince the Saudis that their best protection against the PDRY and a possible leftist regime in San'a, is to strengthen his moderate, pro-Western government. To this end, he has sought Saudi financing to purchase Western, principally American, arms.

Hamdi visited Saudi Arabia in December 1975 and came away with what he felt were firm Saudi assurances of political and military support.

## Early Life and Career

Ibrahim Muhammad al-Hamdi was born in 1937 near Damth in southeastern Yemen, the son of a Zaydi Muslim father and a Shafi'i Muslim mother. At the time, his father was serving as subgovernor of the Mawiya District. Subsequently, Hamdi moved with his family to San'a, where he received an excellent traditional education as a qadi (religious judge) from his father, also a qadi, and other religious shaykhs.



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Hamdi entered the military college in the 1950's, when it was first opened, and graduated as a second lieutenant. At the outbreak of the republican revolution in September 1962, he was appointed governor of the city of Dhamar, although he was merely a lieutenant at the time.

As a carefully tutored protege of Hasan al-'Amri, who was a Prime Minister, Deputy Commander in Chief and later Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces during the 1960's, Hamdi rose rapidly through the ranks. In November 1967 he was appointed to the key position of commander of the General Reserve Forces. He became Under Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior in June 1968, and in January 1971 he was noted as the General Reserve Forces and central area commander.

In September 1971 then Prime Minister Muhsin al-'Ayni appointed Hamdi to the basically powerless position of Deputy Prime Minister for Internal Affairs in an attempt to separate him from his military power base. When the 'Ayni government resigned in December 1972, Hamdi was promoted to colonel and returned to the military as Deputy Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Following his takeover he reduced himself to the rank of lieutenant colonel, now the highest rank in the YAR Armed Forces.

## Control of the Armed Forces

Hamdi's authority within the armed forces comes partly from his popular image as a patriotic reformer fulfilling the army's role of promoting modernization and weakening tribalism. More directly, however, it is derived from his control of key units. The General Reserve Force and the 'Assifa ("Storm") elite force formed from it, although commanded by Hamdi opponent 'Ali Abu Luhum until Hamdi exiled him by appointing him Ambassador to Syria in May 1975, are still considered primarily loyal to Hamdi. The 'Amaliqah ("Giants") elite force and the 20th Brigade, from which it was formed, are commanded by his brother 'Abdallah. The combined paratroop-Sa'iqa ("Thunderbolt") elite force, under 'Abdallah 'Abd al-Alim, and the 1st Armored Brigade are commanded by officers personally loyal to Hamdi. Hamdi used troops of the General Reserve Force, 'Assifa and the 1st Armored Brigade in his 13 June 1974 coup.

## A Complex Personality

Hamdi is a deep and complex personality, not easy to characterize. [redacted] he impresses Yemenis as a man of power, aggressive but not impulsive and apt to take an authoritarian



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approach to problem solving. He is a decisive commander who demands results but does not seek confrontations. He is clearly ambitious, but his ambition seems to be a manifestation of his sincere desire to modernize his country and of his impatience with the pace of change and the maneuverings of politicians. His impatience stems in part from his rapid rise to power: He does not always appreciate the practical problems involved in implementing decisions. Hamdi is nonetheless a careful politician; he proceeds in a low-key fashion and weighs the effects of political decisions on his position.

Personal Data

A loner, Hamdi keeps his own counsel, a trait that some of his close advisers, occasionally find exasperating. Unlike most Yemeni leaders, who tend to be casual and open, Hamdi is often formal and rhetorical in official conversations, probably as a result of his strong religious education. In private, he is generally soft-spoken, friendly, warm, cheerful and unassuming. A proud, sensitive man, he is quick to take offense if he feels that his dignity has been slighted. He does not wear the insignia of rank, emphasizing his dual quasi-civilian and military position. He has a quick sense of humor but with a sardonic twist.

Hamdi is a religious man, but he drinks Scotch and smokes and is not an ascetic in his private life. He regards religion as a private matter and has argued in favor of Yemen's religious tolerance as opposed to Saudi Arabia's doctrinaire approach to Islam.

Hamdi is loyal to his friends

In addition to traveling in countries of the Arab world, Hamdi has visited Iran and Great Britain. He has refused several invitations, linked to promises of military aid, to visit the Soviet Union.

Family

Married, Hamdi has two sons and a daughter. His wife, a tribal woman, stays in traditional seclusion. He and 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, paramount shaykh of the Hashid Tribal Confederation, are married to sisters. In addition to his brother 'Abdallah, Hamdi has another brother, Muhammad, who was a member of the now dissolved



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Consultative Assembly. Hamdi has a limited knowledge of English and is anxious to learn more.

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